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INSIDE UTAH'S ANTI-PUBLIC LANDS AGENDA

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Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah. (Photo: Ethan Miller/Getty Images)

New documents obtained by Pacific Standard show the scope of Utah's efforts to roll back key protections for public lands across the country.

The state of Utah, revered for its abundant mountains and intricate canyons, is also host to some of the most environmentally regressive politicians in the country. From backing the land transfer movement to bitterly attacking Bears Ears National Monument, politicians in the Beehive State have long been relentless opponents of public lands protections in the United States.

Now, after a months-long public records scuffle with the Utah government, a newly obtained document offers insight into the full scope of the state's public lands agenda. Drafted by the Utah Governor's Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office and dated November 30th, 2016, the document is a wish list that reveals the state's top "policy objectives for federal land management." The Utah executive branch initially resisted releasing the document in response to a records request (and still contends that the document is merely a draft). Many of the objectives listed in the document, however, have been fulfilled by the Trump administration since it took office in 2017.

Among other goals, the 15-page document calls on federal lawmakers to amend the Antiquities Act of 1906 and exempt Utah from future national monument designations. It also calls on the executive branch to diminish the size of some national monuments—a wish that was fulfilled when the Trump administration drastically reduced the size of Bears Ears National Monument and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in December of 2017.

The revelations inside the document, though illuminating in their detail, hardly come as a surprise. Over the course of the last decade, Utah politicians at all levels of government have been at the center of a concerted effort to roll back key protections for public lands and wildlife across the country.

In 2012, for instance, the Utah legislature passed a law that sought to force the federal government to turn over vast tracts of public lands to state control, setting off a wave of copycat legislation across the West. It has also advanced a slew of anti-national-monument resolutions in recent years. At the federal level, Utah Congressman Rob Bishop is chair of the House Natural Resources Committee, a position from which he regularly inveighs against conservation laws like the Endangered Species Act, the Antiquities Act, and the Wilderness Act. Then there's Utah Senator Orrin Hatch, who was a key player in convincing President Donald Trump to review and ultimately roll back some national monument designations in the American West. Utah's other senator, Mike Lee, is in the mix too. He recently likened federal lands to the "royal forests" of European kings and called for their effective abolition.

Presiding over this political scene, meanwhile, is Governor Gary Herbert, whose public lands policies have proven extraordinarily polarizing. Among those who have denounced Herbert's anti-conservationist predilections: the gear and clothing companies Black Diamond and Patagonia, as well as Outdoor Retailer, a massive recreation industry trade show that protested Herbert by relocating its operations from Utah to Colorado.

While Utah has made its stance toward federal lands and conservation laws abundantly clear, it can often be difficult to comprehend the true range of the state's priorities. This document offers some insight. Among other things, the document seeks the elimination of the Forest Service's roadless rule, a Clinton-era rule that establishes prohibitions on road construction and timber harvesting on more than 58 million acres of roadless land in the National Forest system. It calls for the executive branch to preclude federal agencies from conducting "additional inventories of land for wilderness and wilderness characteristics," a policy that would hamper the expansion of this country's National Wilderness Preservation System. It proposes the rollback of a suite of land, wildlife, and climate protections, including the Obama administration's now-defunct moratorium on new federal land coal leasing. And it calls on Congress to amend laws like the Federal Land Policy and Management Act and the National Environmental Policy Act to give states much greater control over federal land management. Such policies would not simply impact federal lands in Utah, but federal lands across the entire country.

Read the document in full here:

Steve Bloch, the legal director of the conservation non-profit Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, who reviewed the document, says it reflects "a fundamental refusal on the part of Utah officials to accept that Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service lands are federal public lands managed on behalf of all Americans."

"These Utah politicians are pushing for policies that would principally benefit a handful of local residents and the extractive industries," he says. "That is not the way federal lands should be managed, that is not the way Congress intended them to be managed, and that is why we continue to find ourselves in constant conflict with these parochial politicians."

Utah's Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office, for its part, did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

It is unclear whether, or how, Utah's public lands wish list found its way to Congress or the Trump administration, but the document did make it into the hands of a conservative Utah think tank called the Sutherland Institute. Backed by hundreds of thousands in dark money donations from organizations tied to the Koch brothers' donor network, the Sutherland Institute was a key player in the effort to roll back Bears Ears National Monument in Utah and has been an outspoken defender of the effort to transfer federal land to state control. The think tank also has extensive ties to powerful Republican officials in Washington, D.C., including Senator Mike Lee and Representative Rob Bishop.

Documents obtained through a public records request show that, on April 5th, 2017—less than a month before Trump would announce his administration's review of Bears Ears and other national monuments—a Sutherland Institute staffer named Matthew Anderson sent an email to Redge Johnson, who works as a consultant for the Utah Governor's Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office.

"Hi Redge," Anderson wrote. "Can you send me a list of public lands priorities from your office? I'm going to start compiling everyone's list into one big master document in the next few days."

In an undated email, Johnson wrote to Matt Anderson with the state's priorities.

"Hello Matt, Here is PLPCO's list," he wrote in the email, which had as its subject line "PLPCO Transition Objectives," an apparent reference to the Trump team's transition to the White House. Attached to the email was the document containing the governor's federal land policy priorities.

On April 21st, 2017, Anderson followed up in an email to Johnson and two Utah state legislators, all apparently members of an informal group called the Utah Public Lands Legislative Council.

"It looks like the entire [Utah Public Lands] group won't be able to get together until the end of May," Anderson wrote. "I have been working on compiling all of the public lands wish lists together, but am still waiting on a few organizations/offices to get them in. If possible, I'd like to get all 5 of us to sit down sometime midmorning on Friday (4/28) to discuss the best way to present this list at our next meeting."

From the emails, it appears Anderson was compiling a master list of public lands policy objectives from a variety of officials and other interested parties in Utah, with the ostensible intent to transmit those priorities to relevant policymakers.

Neither the Sutherland Institute nor PLPCO would answer questions about the ultimate destination of these "public lands wish lists." Calendar records show, however, that Anderson had a scheduled phone conference on June 14th, 2017, with Timothy Williams, the Department of the Interior's deputy director of external affairs. Kathleen Clarke, the director of the Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office, has also had numerous scheduled meetings with Interior officials last year, including a May 1st, 2017, meeting with top Interior aide Kathleen Benedetto.